

Fire Chief Bids Fond Farewell

By KEITH L. MARTIN

For 33 years, the name William Harriman has been synonymous with the Duxbury Fire Department.

Today, August 4, will mark Fire Chief Harriman's last day as a member of the department as he and wife Lucy plan to relocate to Virginia to spend time with the couple's daughter, Renee, and her three children.

For Harriman, while he looks forward to retirement, he can't help but look back.

"I hate New England winters and had my fill of them in this job," he said. "Leaving Duxbury will be difficult because the people have been so good to me so I feel like I'm turning my back on them. But it's important to me to see my grandkids grow up. To have a grandfather in the area, to see school plays, to see those report cards...those things are important."

Few will likely feel slighted by Harriman's move south, since he has given his all to the town since joining the department as a firefighter in 1971. He was raised in Carver, where his father and uncle were firefighters, and with the town's fire engine stationed in his uncle's garage across the street, the seed of the vocation was planted early in Harriman.

FIRE DEPARTMENT

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"There's just something about when that truck rolled out to duty that made me think I wanted to do this," said Harriman, 61. "There was just something about getting up in the middle of the night to help someone in need and I just knew that's what I wanted to do."

From the addition of EMT/medical services training for firefighters in 1973 to the enhancements in technology, including thermal imaging, Harriman has seen many changes in the area of fire services both in town and across the country.

As for how he's personally helped to improve the department, Harriman humbly denies a lone role in making any impact, but instead credits his entire department.

"I don't look at anything happening because it's me doing it," he said. "Everything we've done here is done as a collective effort."

Harriman counts the reopening of Ashdod station as one such team approach where the department and members of the community stepped up to play a big role and help the well-being of the town. His feelings are just as strong for the town approving a new ladder truck at Annual Town Meeting in 2002, where Harriman made a passionate speech to voters expressing the need to purchase the vital piece of equipment.



Chief Harriman said that he was very grateful to all the cheers he received at this year's Fourth of July parade, where his granddaughter Taylor said he was like "a rock star."

"That was a very important moment and I practiced that speech and got a lot of help from people in the department," he said. "I knew it would be my last big request as chief...and it passed unanimously, which was a great feeling. Plus, I've never considered myself as a great public speaker, but I still have the tape of that speech and watch it once in a while."

Harriman's path to speechmaker on Town Meeting floor began with his promotion to lieutenant in 1974 after just three years as a firefighter and deputy chief under former Fire Chief Carl O'Neil in 1983. Ten years later, O'Neil retired and it seemed Harriman was the logical choice as his successor, but the job was given to Ken Erickson. While numerous community members were disappointed by the decision, Harriman remained stoic.

"There was a little rejection there, but my feelings were that ultimately, as a fire department, we needed to make forward progress and if that was under someone else, I was satisfied," said Harriman. "I knew I still had the best job in the world and I truly believe that. I'm incredibly fortunate to wake up every morning and say I'm doing what I want to do."

Following Erickson's departure to Walpole in 1996, the opportunity for Harriman to be promoted came up again and this time, he was awarded the promotion.

"That was probably the biggest moment of my life," he said. "You can't imagine what it was like. I still remember the day Rocco Longo told me I'd gotten the job and it was just the proudest moment I've had."

Throughout his career, from firefighter to chief, Harriman has accrued a number of admirers, including other officials in town.

A true team player

As a former selectman, Margaret Kearney had numerous opportunities to work with Harriman and said what stands out most about him is his caring personality and concern for others before himself.

"I think it is very apparent that he's cared for Duxbury, its residents and the firefighters who've worked for him," she said. "He has such care and concern on how others feel, be it his employees or victims of a fire here or in another town."

Selectman Andre Martecchini echoed Kearney's sentiments and in working with Harriman over the years, said he is a pleasure to work with professionally and personally.

He added that another member of the Martecchini family, his 13-year-old daughter Emily, has also known the chief since she was seven and "grew up loving him."

"She's one of his best buddies," said Martecchini. "He has always cared for her and that means a lot to me."

He added that the chief's long-term impact on Duxbury will be an improvement in customer service with citizens, and from open houses to collecting toys for children who ride ambulances, the chief has led by example.

From snowstorms to hurricanes, those who worked alongside Harriman in any number of emergencies also say that he respected everyone and was a true team player.

"I've learned a ton from Bill in dealing with people, about public safety and a number of other things," said Police Chief Mark DeLuca. "He is the epitome of professionalism and dedication and in any situation, he showed up and never took over, but listened to everyone and showed zero ego. He was all about getting the job done."

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Throughout his 27-year career as harbormaster, Don Beers said that Harriman has not only been a good friend, but a "competent partner in the management of the town."

"His life was all about the well-being of this town and it was his top priority," said Beers. "His personal life probably suffered because he prioritized the town first, but he absolutely loves this town."

Those who worked directly with Harriman, fire department personnel past and present, say he has enriched their lives both as chief and as a human being.

P.J. Hussey, president of Duxbury Permanent Firefighters Association Local 2167, said that Harriman, a charter member of the union, was always there for his staff, especially during any type of personal emergency.

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"If your kid was sent to the hospital or you had something going on in your family, he'd come in and work your shift, check on your family for you and be the first one to the hospital if you were the one there," he said. "Family comes first for him and we are part of his family so he'd do anything for you."

Hussey added that the chief has also served as an example for others in the department who want to climb up through the ranks.

"He's worked hard to get where he is and that shows us that if we want to accomplish the type of position that he holds, you can do that," he said. "Most have to go out of town to rise through the ranks, but he stayed in town and did it, which is just great."

Call Fire Captain William Wadsworth has known Harriman since he came to the department and called him "the epitome of what a firefighter should be."

"He eats, drinks and sleeps this job 24/7," said Wadsworth. "He has always been there when people needed him."

One such example, said Wadsworth, was Harriman's work with a critical incident stress team for the county where he helped counsel victims of numerous tragedies.

"I've had the opportunity to see him in these situations and he would come out at two in the morning to help these people if needed no matter where they were," he said. "Because of the nature of the work, this is done very quietly and without fanfare, but Bill's biggest asset is his care for people."

Former Chief O'Neil, called Harriman an "excellent deputy" and as a chief, a man who worked with others to reopen Ashdod station and keep the department changing as the profession did the same.



While he loves Duxbury Beach, Chief Harriman said that the Central Fire Station will always be his favorite part of town.

He's very devoted to this town," said O'Neil. "I'm sure everyone will miss him."

As for any retirement advice, O'Neil said he doesn't envision Harriman surrounded by cows and plows.

"I don't think he wants to be a farmer," said O'Neil. "I think he's got his retirement plans pretty much figured out and he'll be just fine."

Forever grateful

With his move to Virginia coming in the next couple of months, Harriman said that he has had a great relationship with town officials over the past 30 years and an even better relationship with the community as a whole.

"This community has been so supportive of me; I don't know why, I'm just an average guy," he said. "For years, for some reason, they've taken me in and treated me better than I ever thought. I'd like to think I've given something back to all of them in return."

From the missed promotion in 1993 to a diagnosis of prostate cancer two years ago, Harriman said that the town has always been there for him and he is thankful for their support. He said he is often thanked by people in town for the work his department does, which gives him a great feeling, as does the moniker he fought so hard to earn.

"When people say 'chief,' that is the greatest feeling in the world," he said. "I get so emotional because it means so much to me to have that title. It's a job, but there is something about that title I get emotional about."

As for the legacy he leaves behind, Harriman displays his typical modesty.

"People will probably say 'Bill who?,' said Harriman. "I guess I don't think [about legacies]. I want people to remember me as a good chief, but also as a good person and a class act; that will be the ultimate compliment."